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Troy included in cleanup

EPA expands area for removing deadly asbestos

By BOB ANEZ
Associated Press

HELENA – The job of cleaning up asbestos contamination spawned by the decades-long operation of a vermiculite mine near Libby continues to grow, with federal officials expanding the project to include the nearby town of Troy.

Environmental Protection Agency spokesmen told Gov. Judy Martz on Thursday that the extent of problem has

snowballed, with more than 1,200 houses and business in Libby targeted for cleanup and an undetermined number more in Troy, 15 miles to the northwest.

John Wardell, state EPA director, said Troy was added to the Superfund site because health screenings of residents from there turned up the same kind of asbestosis problems found in Libby's citizens.

Conditions in the Troy area are similar to

See TROY, Page A11

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those in Libby, where asbestos-laced vermiculite from the mine was routinely used as insulation in homes and mixed in yard soils, he said.

"We've got houses contaminated all over," said Jim Christiansen, EPA's project manager at Libby. "We found the rate of contamination was much higher than expected. There's just more homes that have (vermiculite)."

Wardell predicted the number of properties in Libby that need to be cleaned up will grow, in addition to the investigation that has to be started in Troy. That area houses about 2,000 people.

Their comments came during and after a meeting with Martz, in which they updated her on the agency's progress in cleaning pollution related to the mine, which was operated by W.R. Grace and Co. from 1963 to 1990.

Asbestos in the vermiculite ore has been blamed for hundreds of illnesses and at

least 200 deaths in the area. The EPA began its investigation of the problem following news reports of deaths and illness in late 1999. Cleanup work started in April 2000 and Libby was declared a Superfund site 14 months ago.

The state has been sued by some Libby residents for allegedly failing to warn them of the asbestos dangers created by the mine. That case is before the Montana Supreme Court.

Wardell said cleanup has almost been completed on the public areas in and around Libby, such as parks, schools and a closed lumber mill. The focus has turned mostly to homes and businesses, he said.

Martz urged the EPA to begin removing cleaned-up areas from the Superfund site as soon as possible, but Christiansen warned her that is a lengthy administrative process.

He said the entire cleanup project eventually could cost \$180 million, but how quickly the work is completed depends on available federal funding.

Earlier this year, the Bush administration added 10 sites to the list of Superfund toxic waste cleanup projects and freed up money for those by reducing funding for Libby and four other projects.

Christiansen said he needs \$20 million a year to clean up 200-250 properties, but the money's not coming in at that rate.

About 180 homes and businesses in Libby have been cleaned up so far, just 15 percent of the properties known to need work, he said. The average cleanup takes one or two weeks and costs \$40,000, he added.

Christiansen said the state's share of the cleanup costs is expected to be no more than \$4 million. The 2003 Legislature authorized the state to borrow up to \$5 million.

He and Wardell acknowledged some Libby residents are frustrated with the slow progress of the work due to lack of funding, but said the cleanup has been concentrated on the areas posing the greatest public health risk.